Weathergrams

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for Judith

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WEATHERGRAMS

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Weathergrams have been so effective & so popular as a rapid handwriting project in Italic classes that this paper is being made available to teachers and others. It is taken from a letter to a former student. Distributed free to Society members, it is being sold to the general public at a price which, it is hoped, will cover the cost of printing. Should any money be left over, it will go to the Society.

"... useful practice is the making of real or definite things." Edward Johnston.

"All distances are within reach." Weathergram.

March 7, 1972

WEATHERGRAMS

The Weathergram is a very short poem of about ten words – or less. It comes as a sudden insight; et hence brevity is essential.[1] Furthermore, no one will stop to read any lengthy statement while standing in wind et rain.

The weathergram is hung on a bough or branch in the garden, at a campsite, or along a mountain trail. The subject matter is usually seasonal, and the weathergram is left out between solstice et equinox or between equinox et solstice.

Raw et incomplete when just written, the weathergram needs the graphic touches of wind, rain, sun and ice – depending on the season. It may fade to an off-white, old bone color, et ragged edges give it some of the qualities of a faded leaf. During its

three months of weathering, it starts going back to nature; this makes it a true weathergram, a "weather-writing."

The weathergram is written on kraft paper cut from grocery store paper bags. The strip is two and a half inches by ten inches, before the top is folded over. A larger size would be too conspicuous. White paper would look like a washing hung out to dry. It should be part of the scene.

Acrylic vermilion is used for the initial, ET Higgins waterproof India ink for the rest. The writing will last as long as the paper does—or longer. Any other color or ink will wash out or fade away.

The origins of the weathergram go back to 1926-27, when I first found translations of Far Eastern poetry.[2] I was taken by their brevity, objectivity,

imagery from nature, dry humor, & associations with calligraphy. But these qualities can be found in Western poetry also.[3] The writer of weathergrams need not become a pseudo-Oriental, playing at being Japanese. My weathergrams have a Pacific Northwest flavor & I do not think that they are foreign to the tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman.

After developing weathergrams I discovered that the idea had been anticipated much earlier, & with great artistry, by the Japanese, who send tanzaku with thank-you notes or exchange them with friends. Like weathergrams, they are given away & are strictly non-commercial.

To the weathergram, rhyme & the set syllable-pattern of the haiku are irrelevant. There are no similies, or

"like" comparisons. Metaphors tend to be buried. There are no static descriptions, no reliance upon purely abstract states of feeling, hence there are few adjectives and adverbs. "Poetical" language & effects are out. The colloquial phrase is preferred. The meanings are generally implied by the leaves, trees, light, birds, bugs, etc. As William Carlos Williams says: "No ideas but in things". But properly done, the things do not remain "thingish."

At first glance, the weathergram is not obscure. But it is somewhat like an iceberg; most of it is out of sight, & the reader must dive into the dark water.

Current-cursive Italic is the letter-form for the weathergram — not formal calligraphy. The writing should be spontaneous & should not look contrived or self-conscious.

Didacticism is avoided. The weathergram tends to be quiet. No violence or melodrama. Dry humor is more characteristic of them than the dramatic. However, buried within some weathergrams are disquieting meanings.

Any listing of the subject matter of weathergrams would be after the event. They are not written to convey some preconceived idea. I can never compose one by wanting to. They just come—of themselves—or not at all. They are scribbled down on scraps of paper & go into my pocket, then into a shopping bag. Later, a slight rewording may be necessary.

The weathergram itself tends to design the layout. The lines are broken into natural speech phrases. (Layout is punctuation.) The key word or image is usually farthest to the right. Nothing is farther to the

left than the beginning. Sometimes the narrowness of the strip of paper may make desirable layout difficult.

How does one learn how to compose weathergrams? Undoubtedly, a familiarity with Zen Buddhist & Taoist literature will help one to acquire the "mental set" or frame of mind that will make him open to & aware of the observations & insights which make weathergrams possible. R.H. Blyth's HAIKU, published by Hokuseido in Japan and his ZEN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, also by Hokuseido, are invaluable. Unfortunately, these volumes may be hard to find. More available is Harold Stewart's volume A CHIME OF WIND-BELLS, Charles E. Tuttle, publisher. Stewart's essay on haiku is highly recommended. Also,

Robert Bly's THE SEA AND THE HONEYCOMB, Beacon Press. Make a large collection of "touchstones" (see Matthew Arnold) which, by comparison, will help you to recognize the proper haiku or weathergram observation. Read widely in poetry & prophecy. When you come to write your own, forget everything you have ever read (for the moment) & just open up. But remember: "no idea but in things."

1. Robert Bly
2. Especially Pound's CATHAY and Florence Ascough's FIR FLOWER TABLETS
3. Blyth's ZEN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

A FEW EXAMPLES OF WEATHERGRAMS

¢ Nighthawk,
you take
the words
right out
of my mouth.

¢ Buttercups
next snow.
So that's
what winter's
been up to!

¢ Moist sky
pervades
the rain forest,
all distances
within reach.

¢ Migrating
wild geese
brush their shadow
across
the graveyard.

¢ Snowdrops,
from what icy
labyrinth
have you found
your way back?

¢ Sunflower
man
earth
galaxy
—all turning.
Anyone
out of Step?

¢ ASTORIA
On one piling
a seagull,
on another
buttercups
& grass

¢ Dewdrops,
what's
your hurry?

¶ Rain forest:
no movement
– only the sky
coming
& going

¶ A lonely night
in the garden
– not even
one
mosquito

¶ Rain
in the bamboo
so loud
you can't
get a word in
edgeways.

¶ A few inches
of puddle
– miles
of sky

¶ Touching
your bark
to the tree's
skin

¶ By what tiny
tendrils
we climb,
O morning glory!

¶ The river
rushes by
the sunken
truck tire

¶ The swayback
old barn
is turned out
to pasture

¶ The flooding river
takes to the
freeway

¶ The tree
chops
the ax.

¢ Lightning
— et the sky
unscarred

¢ Lightning
joins
heaven
et earth
instantly

¢ Snowfall
at year's end,
the curtain
down,
down,
et down

¢ Sunlight
under
dark soil
comes up
dandelions

¢ "Flower"
can be a verb.
Flower!

¢ The sunflower
has yellow
dewdrops,
the daisy
white ones

¢ The space
between flowers
is a flower

¢ Night sky
sends
dewdrops;
morning sky
recalls them

¢ Snow
in the robin's nest
as if
it belonged there

¢ Rimrock
— lava
recollected
in tranquility

¶ Rimrock
– lava
recollected
in tranquility

¶ Sunlight
under
dark soil
comes up
dandelions

¶ Leaves,
if you must
fall,
can't you leave
your shadows?

¶ Twisted trees
at beach
& at timberline
are gateposts

¶ How heavy
the wings
of the wind.
The bamboo shakes

¶ SNOWDROPS,
from
what icy
labyrinth
have you
found your way
back?

¶ Indian Summer
comes
riding gossamer

¶ The first
lawn-mowing
of Spring –
& the dandelions
are spared

¶ Light snow on green
daffodil buds
– spring's around here
someplace

¶ We let a bough
or branch
be our publisher

¢ Maple leaves
come spinning down
Air Mail,
Special Delivery,
Reply Urgent

¢ In the beached
rowboat
a yellow maple leaf
floating

¢ The valley
wedges down
between
its mountains

¢ Scampering leaves
& the kitten
stop
the garden rake

¢ Harvest moon,
empty garden,
cold comfort

¢ Pussy willows
purring

¢ Mother cat
washing
pussywillows

¢ A night owl
swooped by
— or did it?

¢ How loud
the silence
of Multnomah
falls,
frozen

¢ At the cliff's edge
the only
direction
is down

¢ Many
are the weeds;
few
are the cornflowers

¢ We don't
throw rocks
at rainbows

¢ Sky
bird

mountain mountain
waterfall
turbulence

¢ The swimming
fishkite
writhes
dives
leaps
upwind

¢ March thunder
wakens
drowsy
buds

¢ Snowfall
at year end,
the curtain
down
down
& down

¢ A dark
lonely
night
—the wind chimes
tinkle

¢ Harvest moon
—even
the wind bells
are silent

¢ Fir cones
think fir forests
a sure thing

¶ Silence, they say
cannot be written.
Bullfrog:

'Garronk'

¶ The mosquito
weaves
a spidery net
of thin sound

¶ Years ago
we climbed
that mountain
now hidden
in mist

¶ After watching
seagulls,
feeling my weight
in my shoes
again

¶ A warmer
winter afternoon:
the sleeping seeds
stir
then sleep again.

¶ Out of doors
you can carry
moonlight
in a sieve

¶ Underfoot
the dry snow
squeaks,
—the fieldmice,
are they
warm?